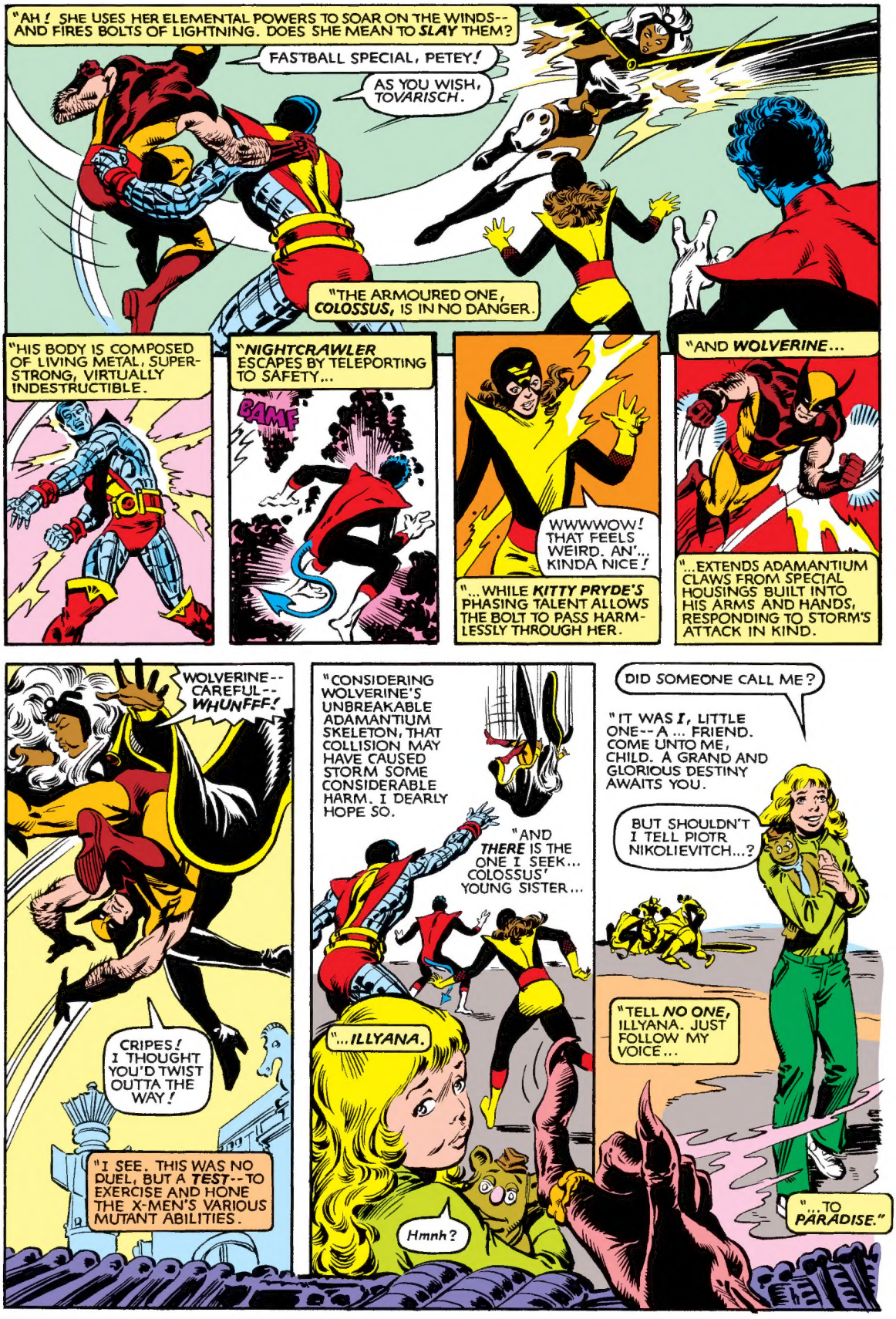
60¢
160
AUG
02461
MARVEL® COMICS GROUP
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
© 1982 MARVEL COMICS GROUP
THE UNCANNY
X-MEN
TM
ANDERSON
WIACEK

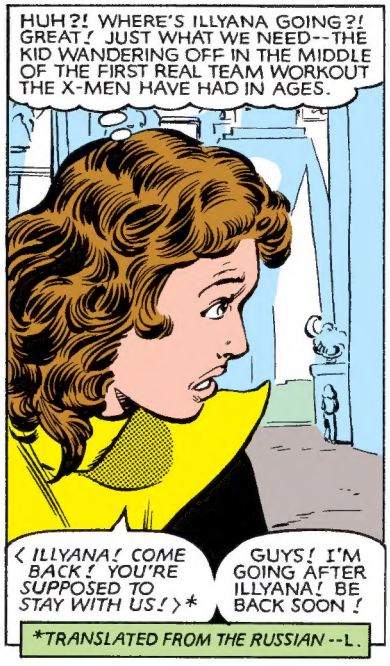
Stan Lee PRESENTS...

CHUTES AND LADDERS!

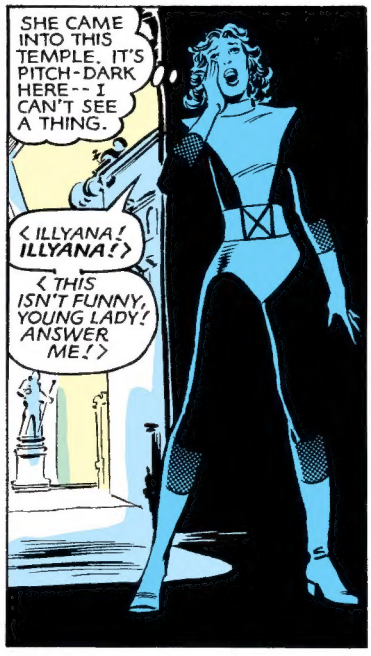
CHRIS CLAREMONT - SCRIPT | BRENT ANDERSON - PENCILS | BOB WIACEK - INKS | TOM ORZECHOWSKI - LETTERS | GLYNIS WIEN - COLORS | LOUISE JONES - EDITOR | JIM SHOOTER - ED-IN-CHIEF

© 2014 Marvel Characters, Inc. All rights reserved. All characters featured in this issue and the distinctive names and likenesses thereof, and all related indicia are trademarks of Marvel Characters, Inc. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with those of any living or dead person or institution is intended, and any such similarity which may exist is purely coincidental.WWW.MARVEL.COM


"AH! SHE USES HER ELEMENTAL POWERS TO SOAR ON THE WINDS-- AND FIRES BOLTS OF LIGHTNING. DOES SHE MEAN TO SLAY THEM?
FASTBALL SPECIAL, PETEY!
AS YOU WISH, TOVARISCH.
"THE ARMOURED ONE, COLOSSUS, IS IN NO DANGER.
"HIS BODY IS COMPOSED OF LIVING METAL, SUPER-STRONG, VIRTUALLY INDESTRUCTIBLE.
"NIGHTCRAWLER ESCAPES BY TELEPORTING TO SAFETY...
BAMF
WWWWOW! THAT FEELS WEIRD. AN'... KINDA NICE!
"...WHILE KITTY PRYDE'S PHASING TALENT ALLOWS THE BOLT TO PASS HARM-LESSLY THROUGH HER.
"AND WOLVERINE...
"...EXTENDS ADAMANTIUM CLAWS FROM SPECIAL HOUSINGS BUILT INTO HIS ARMS AND HANDS, RESPONDING TO STORM'S ATTACK IN KIND.
WOLVERINE-- CAREFUL-- WHUNFFF!
CRIPES! I THOUGHT YOU'D TWIST OUTTA THE WAY!
"I SEE. THIS WAS NO DUEL, BUT A TEST--TO EXERCISE AND HONE THE X-MEN'S VARIOUS MUTANT ABILITIES.
"CONSIDERING WOLVERINE'S UNBREAKABLE ADAMANTIUM SKELETON, THAT COLLISION MAY HAVE CAUSED STORM SOME CONSIDERABLE HARM. I DEARLY HOPE SO.
"AND THERE IS THE ONE I SEEK... COLOSSUS' YOUNG SISTER...
"...ILLYANA.
Hmnh?
DID SOMEONE CALL ME?
"IT WAS I, LITTLE ONE--A ... FRIEND. COME UNTO ME, CHILD. A GRAND AND GLORIOUS DESTINY AWAITS YOU.
BUT SHOULDN'T I TELL PIOTR NIKOLIEVITCH...?
"TELL NO ONE, ILLYANA. JUST FOLLOW MY VOICE...
"...TO PARADISE."

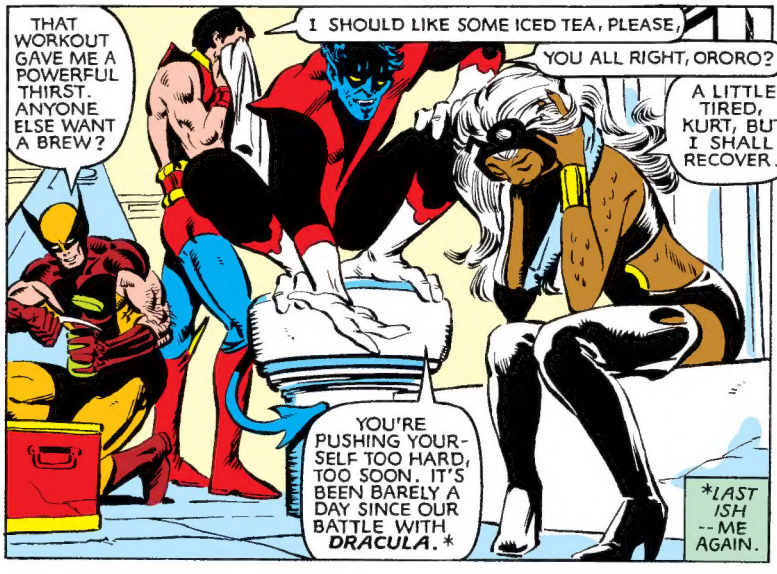

HUH?! WHERE'S ILLYANA GOING?! GREAT! JUST WHAT WE NEED--THE KID WANDERING OFF IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FIRST REAL TEAM WORKOUT THE X-MEN HAVE HAD IN AGES.
< ILLYANA! COME BACK! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO STAY WITH US! >*
GUYS! I'M GOING AFTER ILLYANA! BE BACK SOON!
*TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN --L.

SHE'S ALREADY TURNED THE CORNER. IF I PHASE STRAIGHT THROUGH THE BUILDING, I SHOULD CATCH HER--RATS!
SHE'S MOVING FASTER THAN I EXPECTED--
--ALMOST AS IF SHE KNOWS PRECISELY WHERE SHE'S HEADED.


SHE CAME INTO THIS TEMPLE. IT'S PITCH-DARK HERE--I CAN'T SEE A THING.
< ILLYANA! ILLYANA! >
< THIS ISN'T FUNNY, YOUNG LADY! ANSWER ME! >

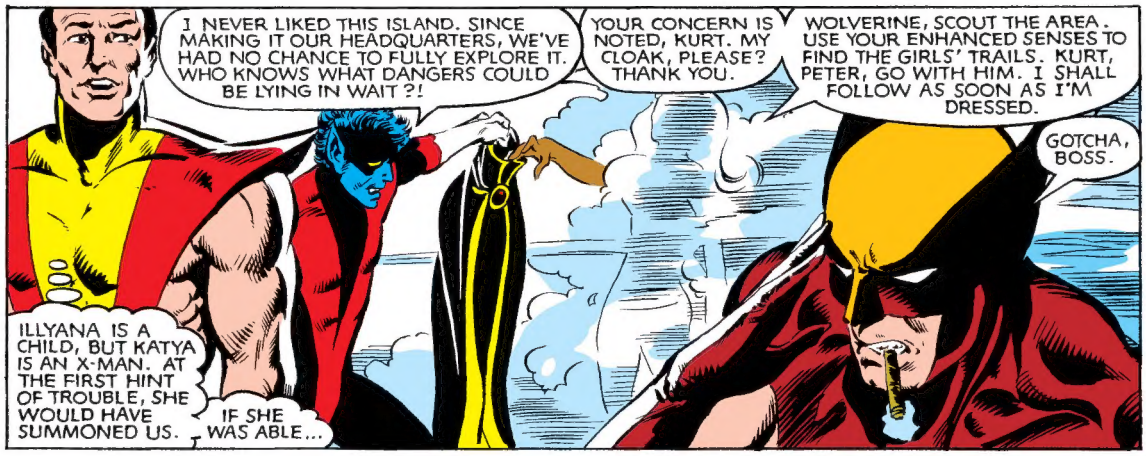
I DON'T LIKE IT. THIS PLACE GIVES ME THE CREEPS.
I'D BETTER GET THE OTHERS.
THAT LIGHT--I CAN'T MOVE!
WHAT'S HAPPENING?! I FEEL--NO! Oh, NO!

ORORO, PETER--ANYONE--HELP MEEEEEEEE!


THAT WORKOUT GAVE ME A POWERFUL THIRST. ANYONE ELSE WANT A BREW?
I SHOULD LIKE SOME ICED TEA, PLEASE.
YOU ALL RIGHT, ORORO?
A LITTLE TIRED, KURT, BUT I SHALL RECOVER.
YOU'RE PUSHING YOURSELF TOO HARD, TOO SOON. IT'S BEEN BARELY A DAY SINCE OUR BATTLE WITH DRACULA.*
*LAST ISH--ME AGAIN.

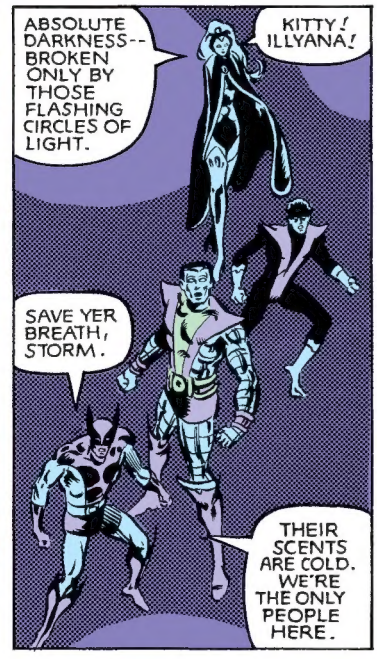
PERHAPS A SHOWER WILL MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER?
WHY, KURT, WHAT A PERFECTLY SPLENDID IDEA!

KURT IS RIGHT, I OUGHT TO REST. BUT DRACULA STILL HAUNTS MY DREAMS. I STILL REMEMBER HOW I LONGED FOR HIS CARESS, HOW I YEARNED TO BE REBORN A VAMPIRE. I NEITHER REST NOR SLEEP...
... BECAUSE I DARE NOT.
WORSE, PROFESSOR XAVIER REMAINS IN COMA, HIS CONDITION CRITICAL AND DETERIORATING. AND SCOTT HAS YET TO RETURN, IN ANSWER TO OUR SUMMONS.
Sigh.
AM I SO WEAK THAT I CANNOT EVEN CREATE A RAIN-STORM?
NO. THE POWER EXISTS WITHIN ME. IT IS SIMPLY A MATTER OF FOCUSING MY CONCENTRATION...
ONCE AGAIN, SHE TURNS TO THAT PART OF HERSELF WHICH PERCEIVES HERSELF, AND THE WORLD AROUND HER...
... AS PATTERNS OF ENERGY. SHE REACHES OUT, GENTLY BENDING THOSE PRIMAL, ELEMENTAL FORCES TO HER WILL, SHAPING THEM WITH INFINITE CARE AND PRECISION...
... UNTIL SHE ACHIEVES THE DESIRED RESULT.
THERE! THAT'S MUCH BETTER!
HEY, IT'S RAINING!
YES, MY FRIENDS--IS IT NOT MARVELOUS?
BLESSED GODDESS, THIS HAS BEEN A TREAT TOO LONG DENIED ME!
WOULD THE REST OF YOU CARE TO JOIN ME? I CAN EASILY EXPAND MY MICRO-STORM...
SOUNDS GOOD TO ME, DARLIN'.
HAS ANYONE SEEN ILLYANA, OR KITTY? THEY ARE NOWHERE ABOUT.
NOPE. WAIT--YEAH! DURIN' OUR SESSION, KITTY YELLED SOMETHIN' ABOUT THE KID TAKIN' A STROLL, THAT SHE WAS GOIN' AFTER HER.
BUT THAT WAS A WHILE AGO.


I NEVER LIKED THIS ISLAND. SINCE MAKING IT OUR HEADQUARTERS, WE'VE HAD NO CHANCE TO FULLY EXPLORE IT. WHO KNOWS WHAT DANGERS COULD BE LYING IN WAIT?!
YOUR CONCERN IS NOTED, KURT. MY CLOAK, PLEASE? THANK YOU.
WOLVERINE, SCOUT THE AREA. USE YOUR ENHANCED SENSES TO FIND THE GIRLS' TRAILS. KURT, PETER, GO WITH HIM. I SHALL FOLLOW AS SOON AS I'M DRESSED.
GOTCHA, BOSS.
ILLYANA IS A CHILD, BUT KATYA IS AN X-MAN. AT THE FIRST HINT OF TROUBLE, SHE WOULD HAVE SUMMONED US.
IF SHE WAS ABLE...

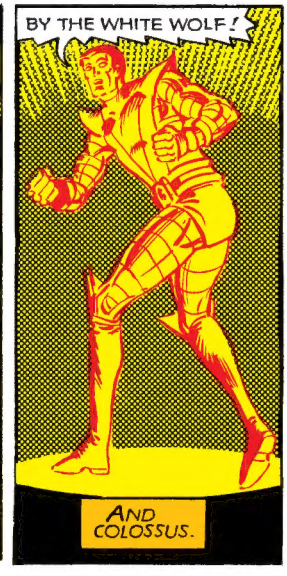
ANYTHING?
I GOT A SOLID FIX ON ILLYANA.
KITTY'S TRACK FADES IN AN' OUT. I FIGURE SHE WAS PHASIN', TRYIN' TO CUT THE KID'S LEAD.

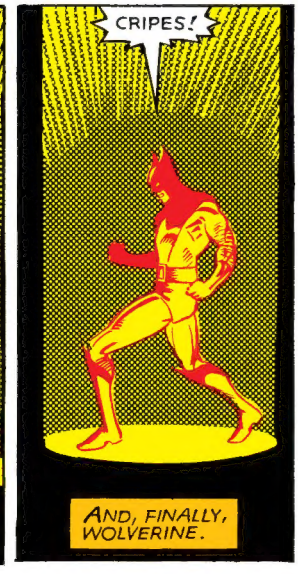
BOTH TRAILS LEAD INSIDE THIS TEMPLE. ANYBODY BEEN HERE BEFORE, KNOW THE LAYOUT?
NEIN.
NYET.
ME, NEITHER.

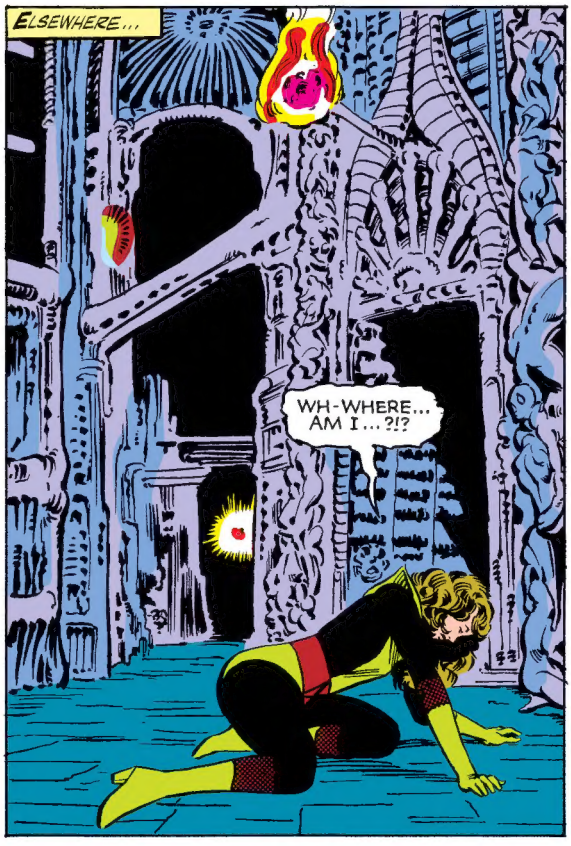

ABSOLUTE DARKNESS--BROKEN ONLY BY THOSE FLASHING CIRCLES OF LIGHT.
KITTY! ILLYANA!
SAVE YER BREATH, STORM.
THEIR SCENTS ARE COLD. WE'RE THE ONLY PEOPLE HERE.

THEN WHERE--GODDESS!
STORM DISAPPEARS.

ACH DU LEI--*
AS DOES NIGHTCRAWLER.

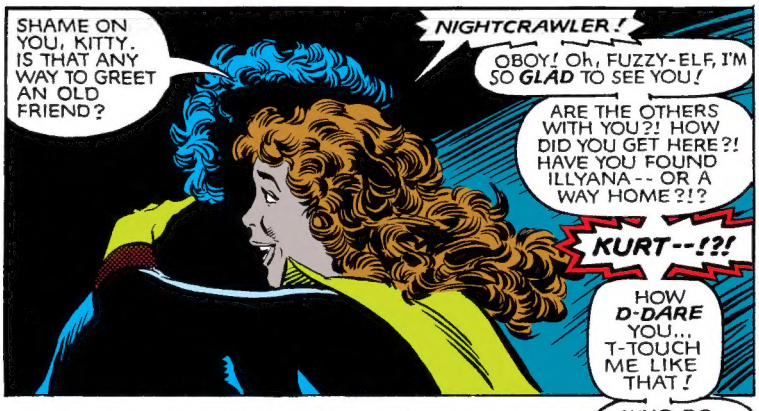

BY THE WHITE WOLF!
AND COLOSSUS.


CRIPES!
AND, FINALLY, WOLVERINE.


ELSEWHERE...
WH-WHERE... AM I...?!?

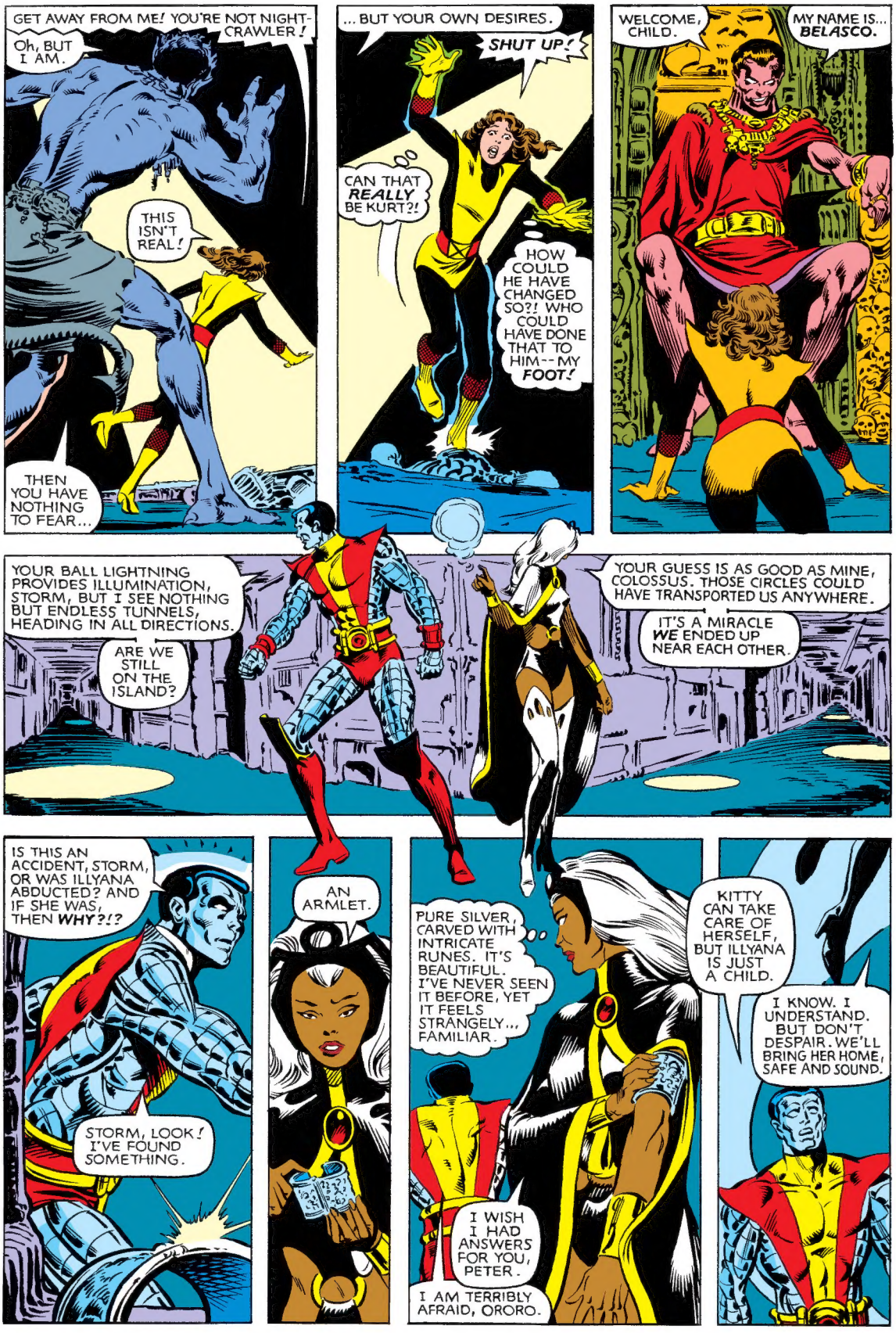
WOW! THIS PLACE LOOKS AS AWFUL AS I FEEL!
THAT LIGHT MUST HAVE BEEN A TELEPORT MECHANISM, LIKE LARRY NIVEN'S "STEPPING DISKS".
I HOPE THIS PLACE IS AS DESERTED AS OUR ISLAND. IF THE DECOR IS ANYTHING TO GO BY, I SURE DON'T WANT TO MEET WHOEVER LIVES HERE. YUCK!

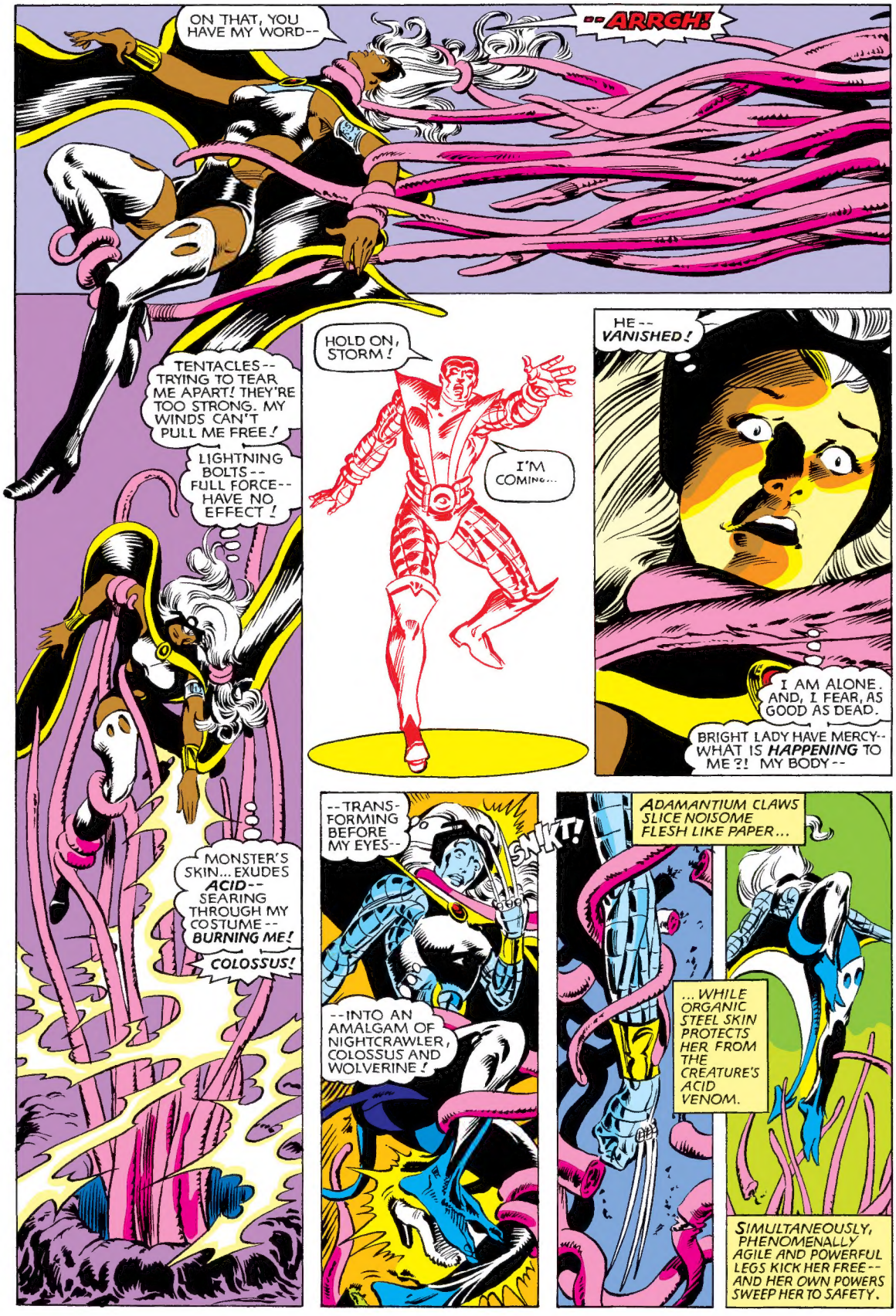
I'LL GIVE A YELL. MAYBE ILLYANA'S IN EARSHOT.
<ILLYANA!>
LOOKING FOR SOMEONE, KATZCHEN?
YIKES!!

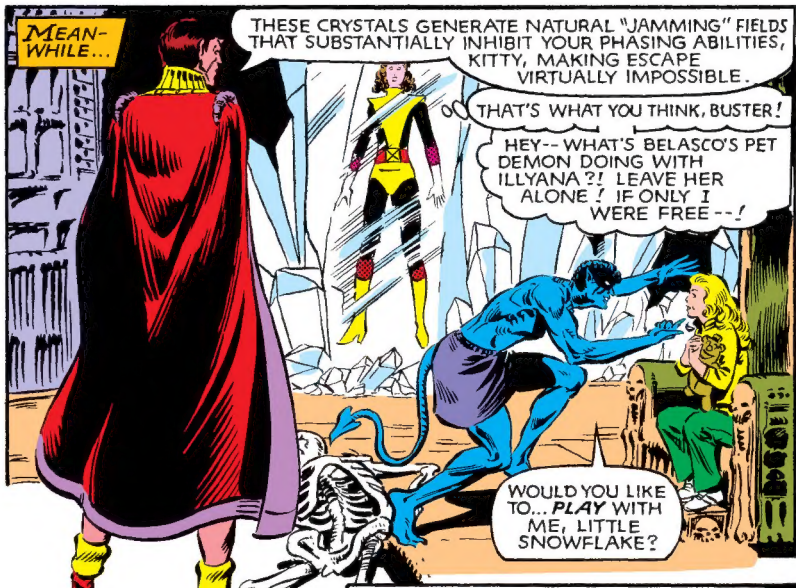

SHAME ON YOU, KITTY. IS THAT ANY WAY TO GREET AN OLD FRIEND?
NIGHTCRAWLER!
OBOY! Oh, FUZZY-ELF, I'M SO GLAD TO SEE YOU!
ARE THE OTHERS WITH YOU?! HOW DID YOU GET HERE?! HAVE YOU FOUND ILLYANA -- OR A WAY HOME?!?
KURT--!?!
HOW D-DARE YOU... T-TOUCH ME LIKE THAT!

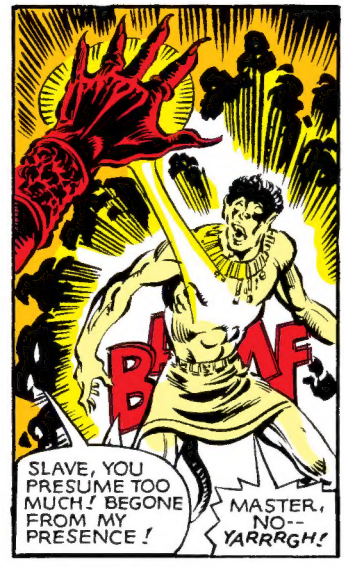
LEIBLING, YOU SOUND SO SHOCKED. DIDN'T YOU JUST SAY...
WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?! WHAT... WHAT KIND OF A PERSON D'YOU THINK I AM?!

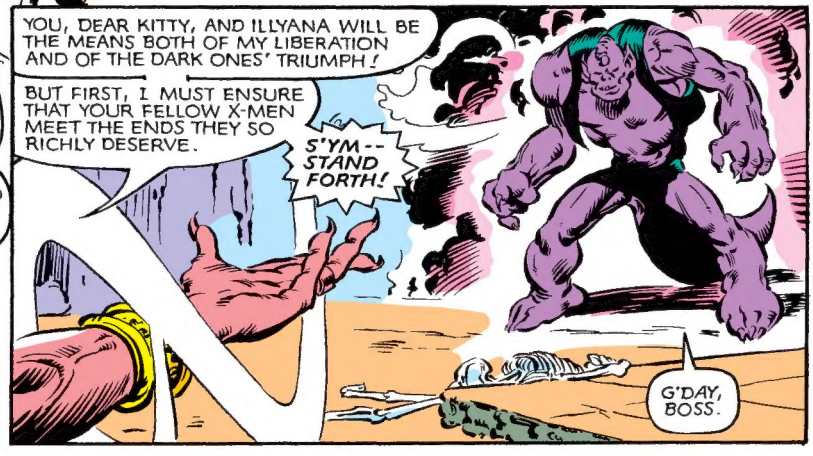
...YOU WERE GLAD TO SEE ME?
I WAS MERELY GIVING YOU AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROVE IT.

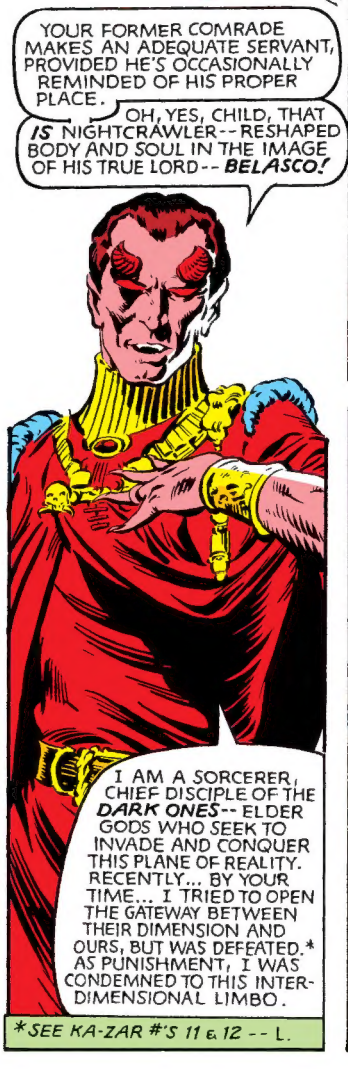

GET AWAY FROM ME! YOU'RE NOT NIGHT-CRAWLER!
Oh, BUT I AM.
THIS ISN'T REAL!
THEN YOU HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR...
... BUT YOUR OWN DESIRES.
SHUT UP!
CAN THAT REALLY BE KURT?!
HOW COULD HE HAVE CHANGED SO?! WHO COULD HAVE DONE THAT TO HIM--MY FOOT!
WELCOME, CHILD.
MY NAME IS... BELASCO.
YOUR BALL LIGHTNING PROVIDES ILLUMINATION, STORM, BUT I SEE NOTHING BUT ENDLESS TUNNELS, HEADING IN ALL DIRECTIONS.
ARE WE STILL ON THE ISLAND?
YOUR GUESS IS AS GOOD AS MINE, COLOSSUS. THOSE CIRCLES COULD HAVE TRANSPORTED US ANYWHERE.
IT'S A MIRACLE WE ENDED UP NEAR EACH OTHER.
IS THIS AN ACCIDENT, STORM, OR WAS ILLYANA ABDUCTED? AND IF SHE WAS, THEN WHY?!?
STORM, LOOK! I'VE FOUND SOMETHING.
AN ARMLET.
PURE SILVER, CARVED WITH INTRICATE RUNES. IT'S BEAUTIFUL. I'VE NEVER SEEN IT BEFORE, YET IT FEELS STRANGELY... FAMILIAR.
I WISH I HAD ANSWERS FOR YOU, PETER.
I AM TERRIBLY AFRAID, ORORO.
KITTY CAN TAKE CARE OF HERSELF, BUT ILLYANA IS JUST A CHILD.
I KNOW. I UNDERSTAND. BUT DON'T DESPAIR. WE'LL BRING HER HOME, SAFE AND SOUND.

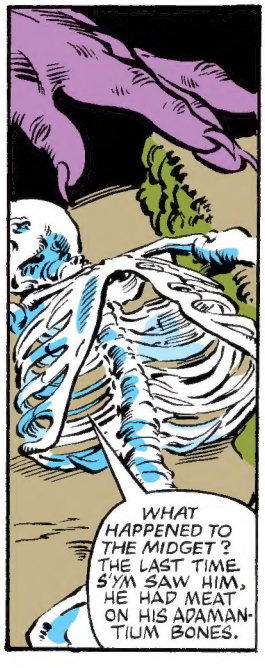

ON THAT, YOU HAVE MY WORD--
--ARRGH!
TENTACLES-- TRYING TO TEAR ME APART! THEY'RE TOO STRONG. MY WINDS CAN'T PULL ME FREE!
LIGHTNING BOLTS-- FULL FORCE-- HAVE NO EFFECT!
MONSTER'S SKIN... EXUDES ACID-- SEARING THROUGH MY COSTUME-- BURNING ME!
COLOSSUS!
HOLD ON, STORM!
I'M COMING...
HE-- VANISHED!
I AM ALONE. AND, I FEAR, AS GOOD AS DEAD.
BRIGHT LADY HAVE MERCY-- WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?! MY BODY--
--TRANS-FORMING BEFORE MY EYES--
--INTO AN AMALGAM OF NIGHTCRAWLER, COLOSSUS AND WOLVERINE!
SNKT!
ADAMANTIUM CLAWS SLICE NOISOME FLESH LIKE PAPER...
... WHILE ORGANIC STEEL SKIN PROTECTS HER FROM THE CREATURE'S ACID VENOM.
SIMULTANEOUSLY, PHENOMENALLY AGILE AND POWERFUL LEGS KICK HER FREE-- AND HER OWN POWERS SWEEP HER TO SAFETY.

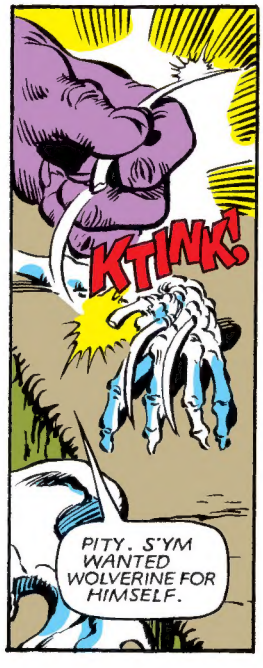

MEAN-WHILE...
THESE CRYSTALS GENERATE NATURAL "JAMMING" FIELDS THAT SUBSTANTIALLY INHIBIT YOUR PHASING ABILITIES, KITTY, MAKING ESCAPE VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE.
THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK, BUSTER!
HEY-- WHAT'S BELASCO'S PET DEMON DOING WITH ILLYANA?! LEAVE HER ALONE! IF ONLY I WERE FREE--!
WOULD YOU LIKE TO... PLAY WITH ME, LITTLE SNOWFLAKE?


SLAVE, YOU PRESUME TOO MUCH! BEGONE FROM MY PRESENCE!
MASTER, NO-- YARRRGH!

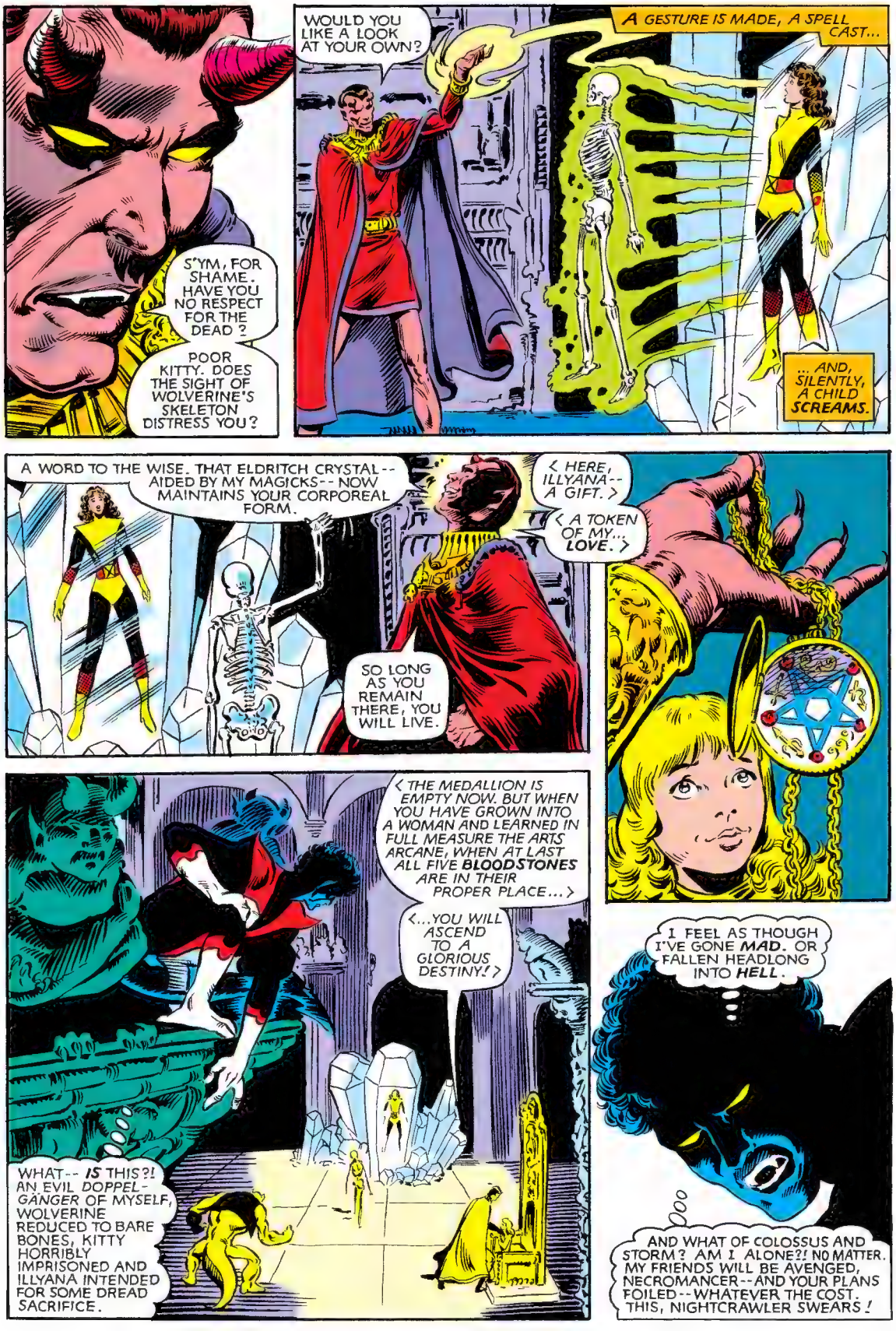

YOU, DEAR KITTY, AND ILLYANA WILL BE THE MEANS BOTH OF MY LIBERATION AND OF THE DARK ONES' TRIUMPH!
BUT FIRST, I MUST ENSURE THAT YOUR FELLOW X-MEN MEET THE ENDS THEY SO RICHLY DESERVE.
S'YM-- STAND FORTH!
G'DAY, BOSS.

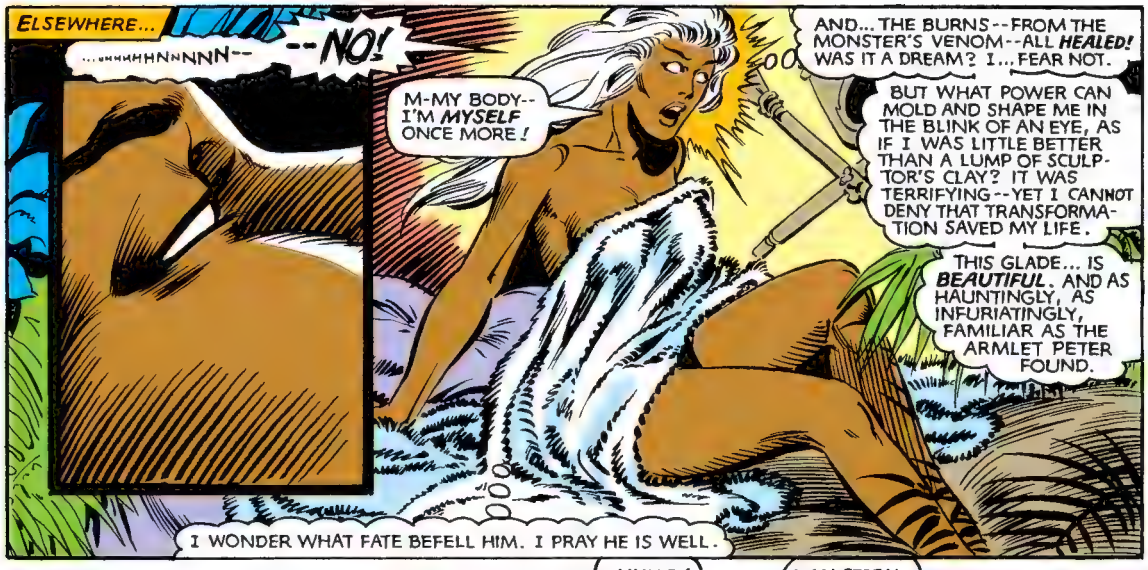

YOUR FORMER COMRADE MAKES AN ADEQUATE SERVANT, PROVIDED HE'S OCCASIONALLY REMINDED OF HIS PROPER PLACE.
OH, YES, CHILD, THAT IS NIGHTCRAWLER-- RESHAPED BODY AND SOUL IN THE IMAGE OF HIS TRUE LORD-- BELASCO!
I AM A SORCERER, CHIEF DISCIPLE OF THE DARK ONES-- ELDER GODS WHO SEEK TO INVADE AND CONQUER THIS PLANE OF REALITY. RECENTLY... BY YOUR TIME... I TRIED TO OPEN THE GATEWAY BETWEEN THEIR DIMENSION AND OURS, BUT WAS DEFEATED.* AS PUNISHMENT, I WAS CONDEMNED TO THIS INTER-DIMENSIONAL LIMBO.
*SEE KA-ZAR #'S 11 & 12 -- L.

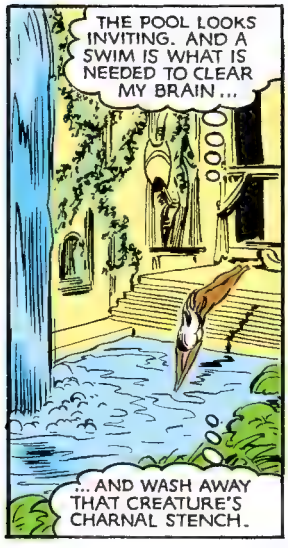

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MIDGET? THE LAST TIME S'YM SAW HIM, HE HAD MEAT ON HIS ADAMANTIUM BONES.


KTINK!
PITY. S'YM WANTED WOLVERINE FOR HIMSELF.

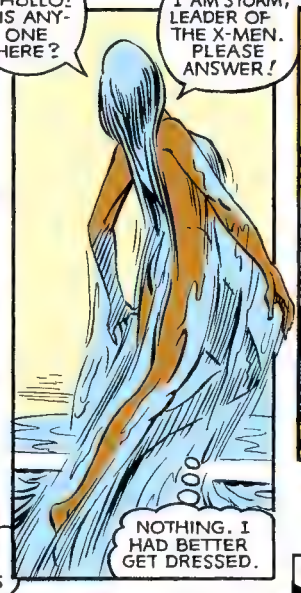
SO, TELL ME, BOSS-- WHO DO YOU WANT KILLED?


S'YM, FOR SHAME. HAVE YOU NO RESPECT FOR THE DEAD?
POOR KITTY. DOES THE SIGHT OF WOLVERINE'S SKELETON DISTRESS YOU?
WOULD YOU LIKE A LOOK AT YOUR OWN?
A GESTURE IS MADE, A SPELL CAST...
... AND, SILENTLY, A CHILD SCREAMS.
A WORD TO THE WISE. THAT ELDRITCH CRYSTAL-- AIDED BY MY MAGICKS-- NOW MAINTAINS YOUR CORPOREAL FORM.
SO LONG AS YOU REMAIN THERE, YOU WILL LIVE.
< HERE, ILLYANA-- A GIFT. >
< A TOKEN OF MY... LOVE. >
< THE MEDALLION IS EMPTY NOW. BUT WHEN YOU HAVE GROWN INTO A WOMAN AND LEARNED IN FULL MEASURE THE ARTS ARCANE, WHEN AT LAST ALL FIVE BLOODSTONES ARE IN THEIR PROPER PLACE... >
<...YOU WILL ASCEND TO A GLORIOUS DESTINY! >
WHAT-- IS THIS?! AN EVIL DOPPEL-GANGER OF MYSELF, WOLVERINE REDUCED TO BARE BONES, KITTY HORRIBLY IMPRISONED AND ILLYANA INTENDED FOR SOME DREAD SACRIFICE.
I FEEL AS THOUGH I'VE GONE MAD. OR FALLEN HEADLONG INTO HELL.
AND WHAT OF COLOSSUS AND STORM? AM I ALONE?! NO MATTER. MY FRIENDS WILL BE AVENGED, NECROMANCER--AND YOUR PLANS FOILED--WHATEVER THE COST. THIS, NIGHTCRAWLER SWEARS!


ELSEWHERE...
...uuuuuHNNNNN--
--NO!
M-MY BODY--I'M MYSELF ONCE MORE!
AND... THE BURNS--FROM THE MONSTER'S VENOM--ALL HEALED! WAS IT A DREAM? I... FEAR NOT.
BUT WHAT POWER CAN MOLD AND SHAPE ME IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, AS IF I WAS LITTLE BETTER THAN A LUMP OF SCULPTOR'S CLAY? IT WAS TERRIFYING--YET I CANNOT DENY THAT TRANSFORMATION SAVED MY LIFE.
THIS GLADE... IS BEAUTIFUL. AND AS HAUNTINGLY, AS INFURIATINGLY, FAMILIAR AS THE ARMLET PETER FOUND.
I WONDER WHAT FATE BEFELL HIM. I PRAY HE IS WELL.


THE POOL LOOKS INVITING. AND A SWIM IS WHAT IS NEEDED TO CLEAR MY BRAIN...
...AND WASH AWAY THAT CREATURE'S CHARNAL STENCH.

WHO SAVED ME?
WOULD THAT PERSON BE WILLING TO AID THE X-MEN FURTHER?


HULLO! IS ANYONE HERE?
I AM STORM, LEADER OF THE X-MEN. PLEASE ANSWER!
NOTHING. I HAD BETTER GET DRESSED.

=UGH!= MY COSTUME--RUINED.

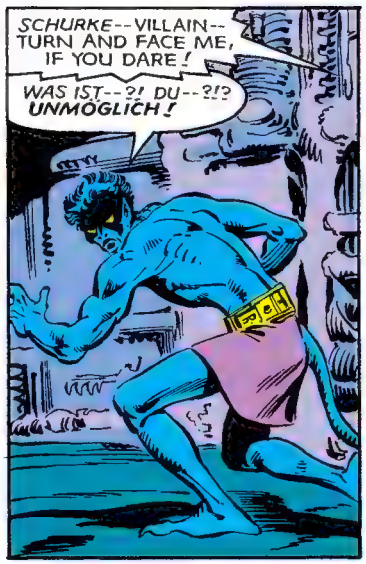
HERE ARE CLOTHES, THOUGH--MY SAVIOR IS A WOMAN!

A PERFECT FIT.
BUT THIS AMULET. I TOOK IT WITHOUT THINKING. IT FEELS SO... RIGHT... AROUND MY NECK.

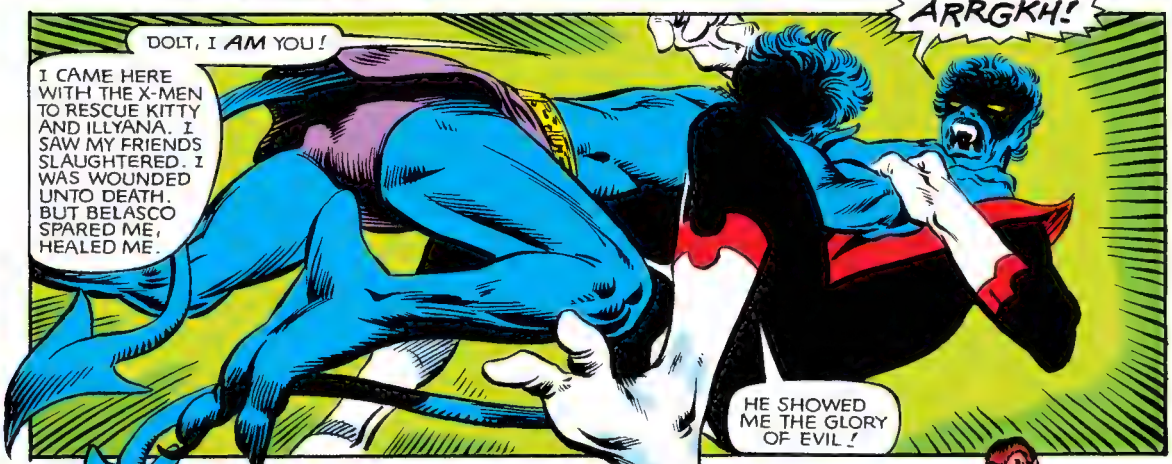
DID MY BENEFACTRESS MEAN FOR ME TO HAVE IT, AS A WEAPON AGAINST OUR UNKNOWN FOE?
I THANK YOU, FRIEND. IF POSSIBLE, I SHALL RETURN WHAT I HAVE TAKEN. PERHAPS, THEN, WE WILL MEET.

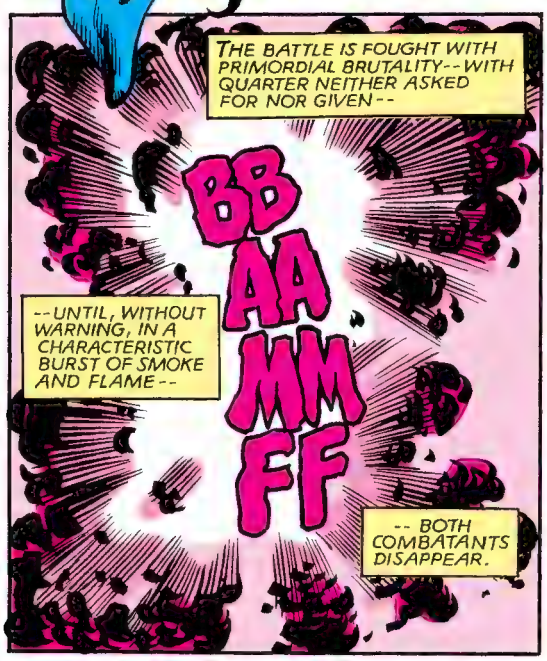
FAREWELL.
FEAR NOT, WIND-RIDER. WE SHALL MEET. GODDESS HELP US BOTH.

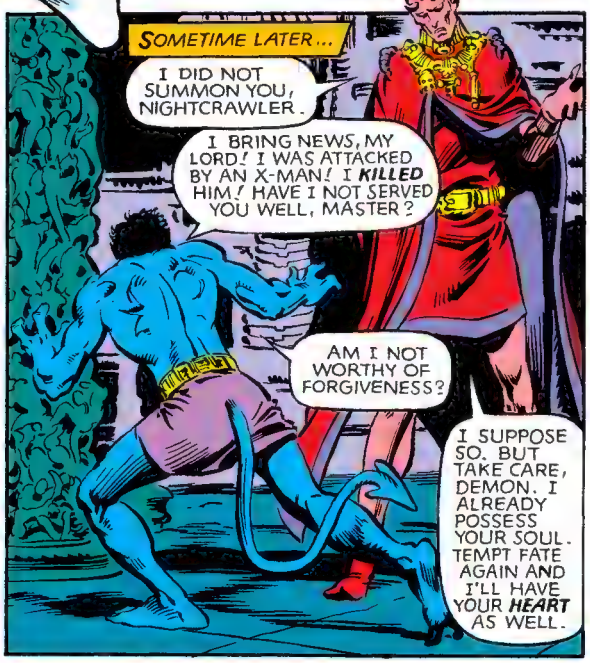
I WILL HELP SAVE THE X-MEN, IF I CAN. BUT IF I MUST SACRIFICE YOU TO DESTROY BELASCO, THEN--FORGIVE ME, ORORO--
--I SHALL DO SO.

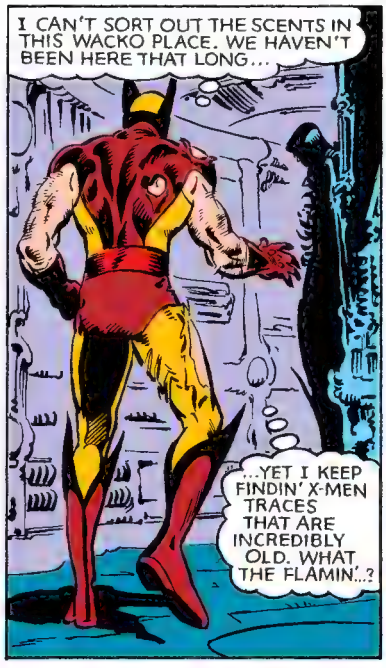

SCHURKE--VILLAIN--TURN AND FACE ME, IF YOU DARE!
WAS IST--?! DU--?!? UNMÖGLICH!

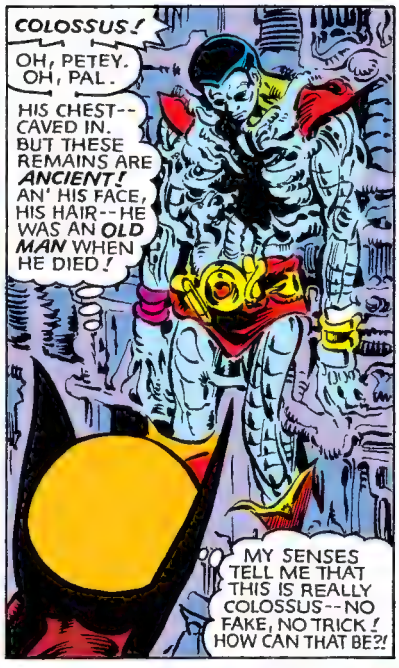
THAT IS WHAT I THOUGHT WHEN I FIRST BEHELD YOU.
TELL ME, KURT WAGNER--
...DOES NOT THE SIGHT OF YOUR TRUE SELF FILL YOU WITH PRIDE?!
NO! YOU ARE NOT ME! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH--


ARRGKH!
DOLT, I AM YOU!
I CAME HERE WITH THE X-MEN TO RESCUE KITTY AND ILLYANA. I SAW MY FRIENDS SLAUGHTERED. I WAS WOUNDED UNTO DEATH. BUT BELASCO SPARED ME, HEALED ME.
HE SHOWED ME THE GLORY OF EVIL!

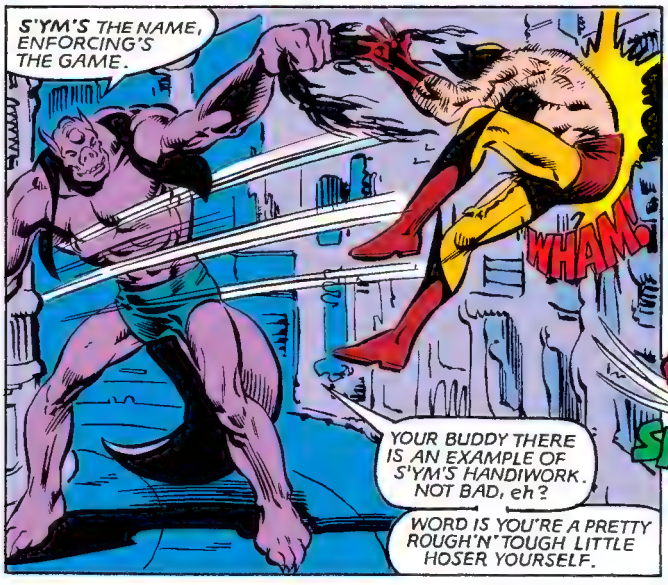

THE BATTLE IS FOUGHT WITH PRIMORDIAL BRUTALITY--WITH QUARTER NEITHER ASKED FOR NOR GIVEN--
BB AA MM FF
--UNTIL, WITHOUT WARNING, IN A CHARACTERISTIC BURST OF SMOKE AND FLAME--
-- BOTH COMBATANTS DISAPPEAR.

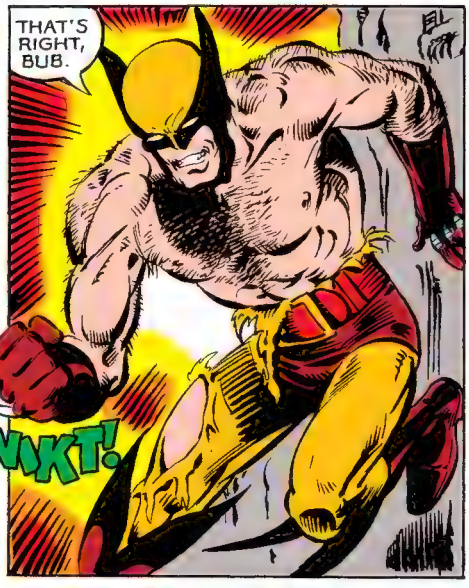

SOMETIME LATER...
I DID NOT SUMMON YOU, NIGHTCRAWLER.
I BRING NEWS, MY LORD! I WAS ATTACKED BY AN X-MAN! I KILLED HIM! HAVE I NOT SERVED YOU WELL, MASTER?
AM I NOT WORTHY OF FORGIVENESS?
I SUPPOSE SO. BUT TAKE CARE, DEMON. I ALREADY POSSESS YOUR SOUL. TEMPT FATE AGAIN AND I'LL HAVE YOUR HEART AS WELL.

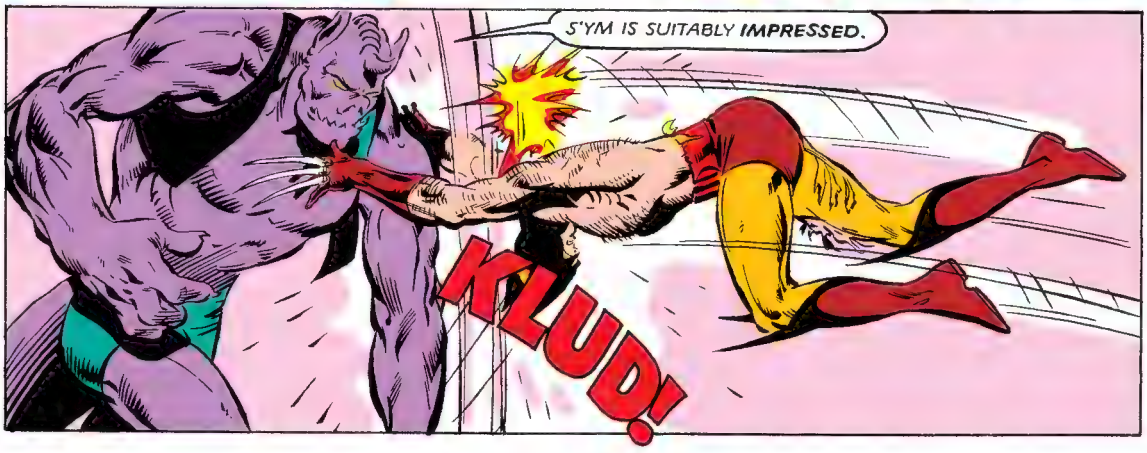

I CAN'T SORT OUT THE SCENTS IN THIS WACKO PLACE. WE HAVEN'T BEEN HERE THAT LONG...
...YET I KEEP FINDIN' X-MEN TRACES THAT ARE INCREDIBLY OLD. WHAT THE FLAMIN'...?

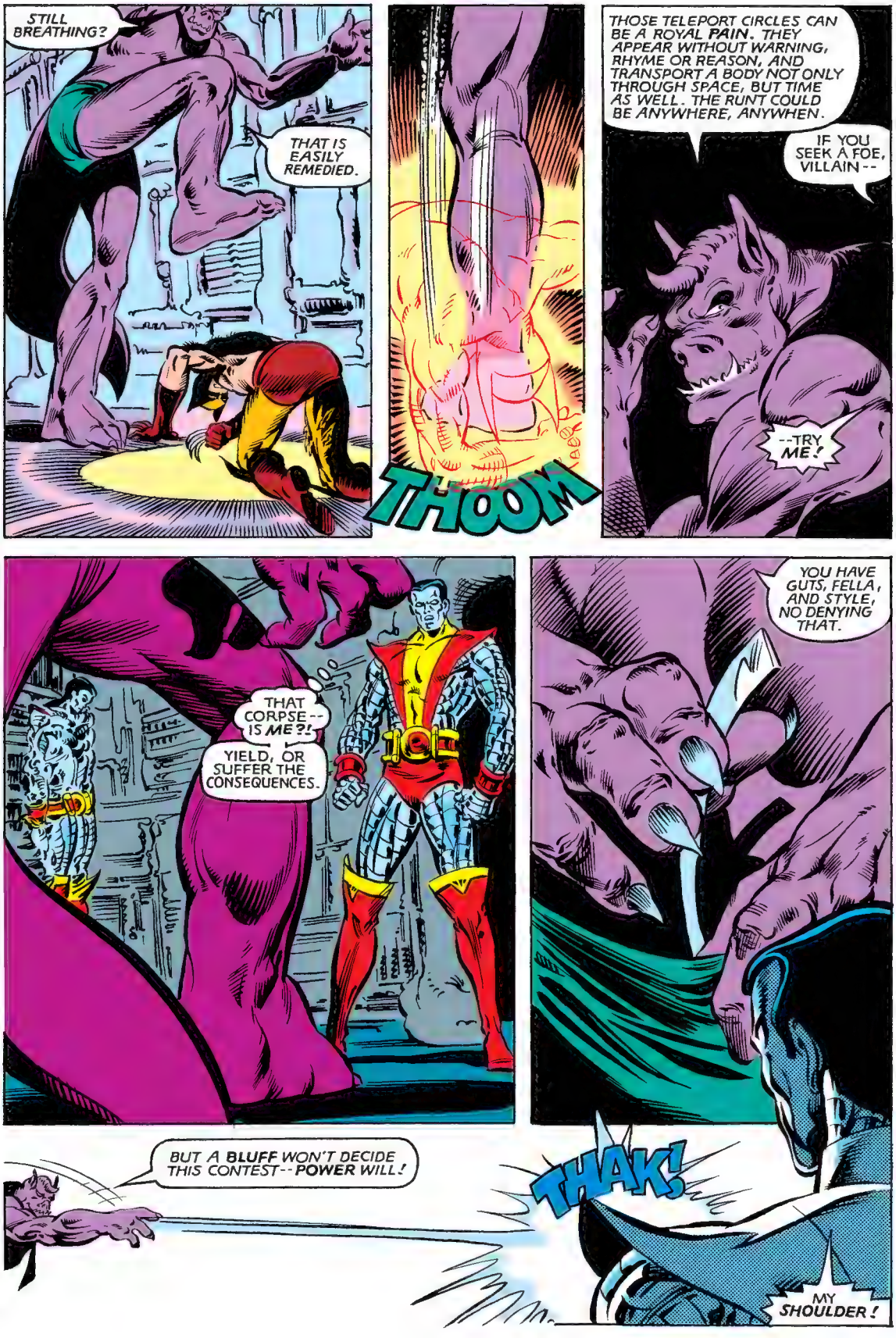

COLOSSUS!
OH, PETEY. OH, PAL.
HIS CHEST--CAVED IN. BUT THESE REMAINS ARE ANCIENT! AN' HIS FACE, HIS HAIR--HE WAS AN OLD MAN WHEN HE DIED!
MY SENSES TELL ME THAT THIS IS REALLY COLOSSUS--NO FAKE, NO TRICK! HOW CAN THAT BE?!

G'DAY, SHRIMP.
AHHRR!!

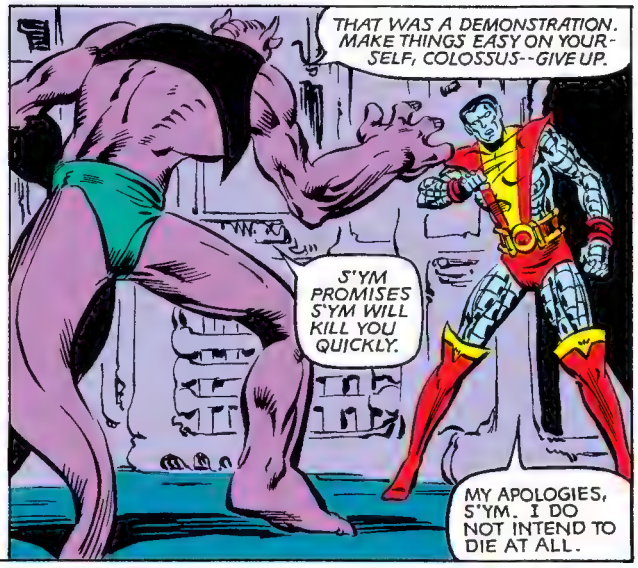

S'YM'S THE NAME, ENFORCING'S THE GAME.
WHAM!
YOUR BUDDY THERE IS AN EXAMPLE OF S'YM'S HANDIWORK. NOT BAD, eh?
WORD IS YOU'RE A PRETTY ROUGH'N'TOUGH LITTLE HOSER YOURSELF.


THAT'S RIGHT, BUB.
SNIKT!


S'YM IS SUITABLY IMPRESSED.
KLUD!

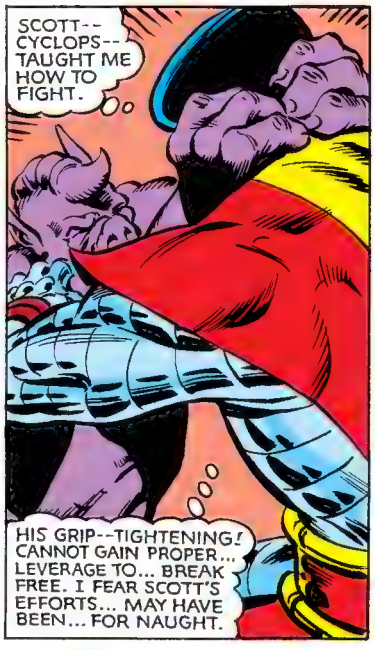

STILL BREATHING?
THAT IS EASILY REMEDIED.
THOOM
THOSE TELEPORT CIRCLES CAN BE A ROYAL PAIN. THEY APPEAR WITHOUT WARNING, RHYME OR REASON, AND TRANSPORT A BODY NOT ONLY THROUGH SPACE, BUT TIME AS WELL. THE RUNT COULD BE ANYWHERE, ANYWHEN.
IF YOU SEEK A FOE, VILLAIN--
--TRY ME!
THAT CORPSE--IS ME?!
YIELD, OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES.
YOU HAVE GUTS, FELLA, AND STYLE, NO DENYING THAT.
BUT A BLUFF WON'T DECIDE THIS CONTEST--POWER WILL!
THAK!
MY SHOULDER!

ONE OF WOLVERINE'S CLAWS!
IT PENETRATED MY ARMORED FORM! THE CREATURE'S STRENGTH IS BEYOND BELIEF!

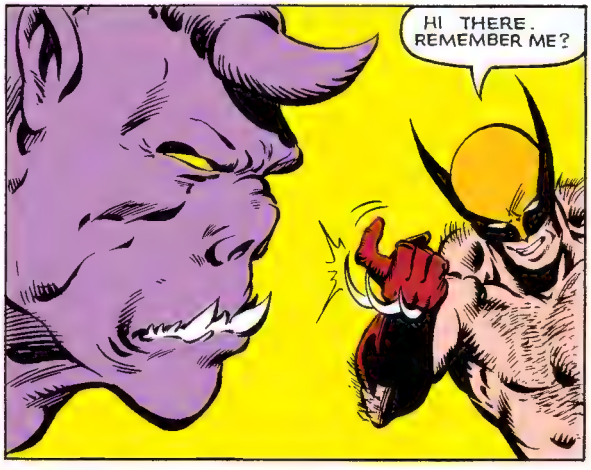

THAT WAS A DEMONSTRATION. MAKE THINGS EASY ON YOURSELF, COLOSSUS--GIVE UP.
S'YM PROMISES S'YM WILL KILL YOU QUICKLY.
MY APOLOGIES, S'YM. I DO NOT INTEND TO DIE AT ALL.

THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK.
HIS SPEED...
...RIVALS HIS STRENGTH.

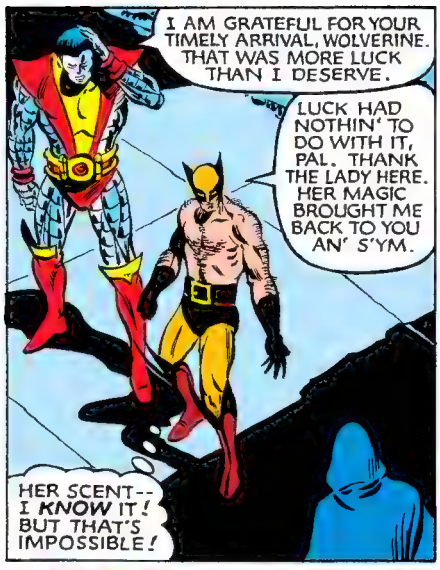
I CANNOT MATCH HIS RAW POWER.
I MUST FIND WAYS TO TURN IT AGAINST HIM.


SCOTT--CYCLOPS--TAUGHT ME HOW TO FIGHT.
HIS GRIP--TIGHTENING! CANNOT GAIN PROPER... LEVERAGE TO... BREAK FREE. I FEAR SCOTT'S EFFORTS... MAY HAVE BEEN... FOR NAUGHT.

YEEEOWWWW!
SNIKT!

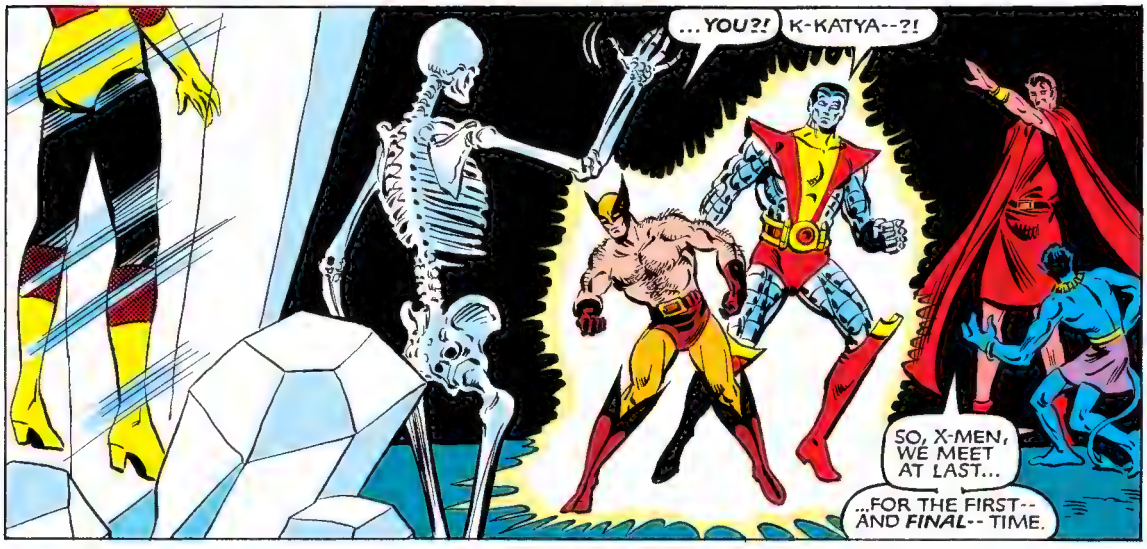

HI THERE. REMEMBER ME?

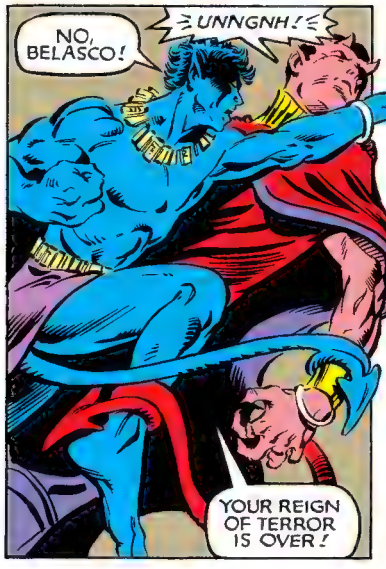
S'YM TRIES TO BE CONSIDERATE, TRIES TO BE MERCIFUL -- AND WHAT DOES IT GET HIM ?!
GRIEF, BUB!
AN' THIS...
...IS ONLY...
...THE BEGINNING!
WRONG, RUNT.
CRIPES, HE AIN'T EVEN SCRATCHED!
I DO NOT LIKE STRIKING FROM BEHIND -- IT IS DISHONORABLE--
COLOSSUS -- WHAT?! NO!
--BUT IN YOUR CASE, MONSTER, I WILL GLADLY MAKE AN EXCEPTION!
BON VOYAGE, COMRADE S'YM.
A TELEPORT CIRCLE! YOU LOUSY, STINKING... *


I AM GRATEFUL FOR YOUR TIMELY ARRIVAL, WOLVERINE. THAT WAS MORE LUCK THAN I DESERVE.
LUCK HAD NOTHIN' TO DO WITH IT, PAL. THANK THE LADY HERE. HER MAGIC BROUGHT ME BACK TO YOU AN' S'YM.
HER SCENT-- I KNOW IT! BUT THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!

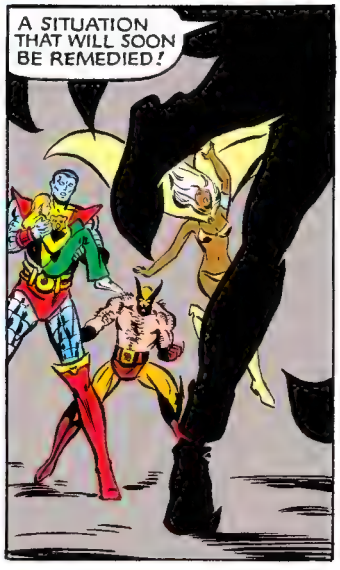
LOGAN HAS RECOGNIZED ME-- AND IS APPROPRIATELY CONFUSED. HE WILL LEARN THE TRUTH SOON ENOUGH, I FEAR.
YOUR FRIENDS HAVE NEED OF YOU.

I SHALL SEND YOU TO THEM.
WAIT A MINUTE, LADY! WHAT ABOUT...


...YOU?!
K-KATYA--?!
SO, X-MEN, WE MEET AT LAST...
...FOR THE FIRST-- AND FINAL-- TIME.

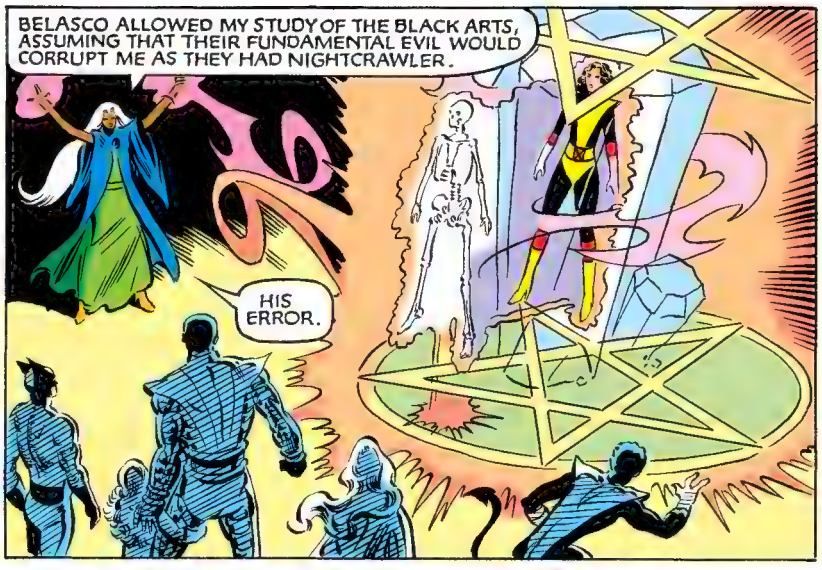

NO, BELASCO!
UNNGNH!
YOUR REIGN OF TERROR IS OVER!

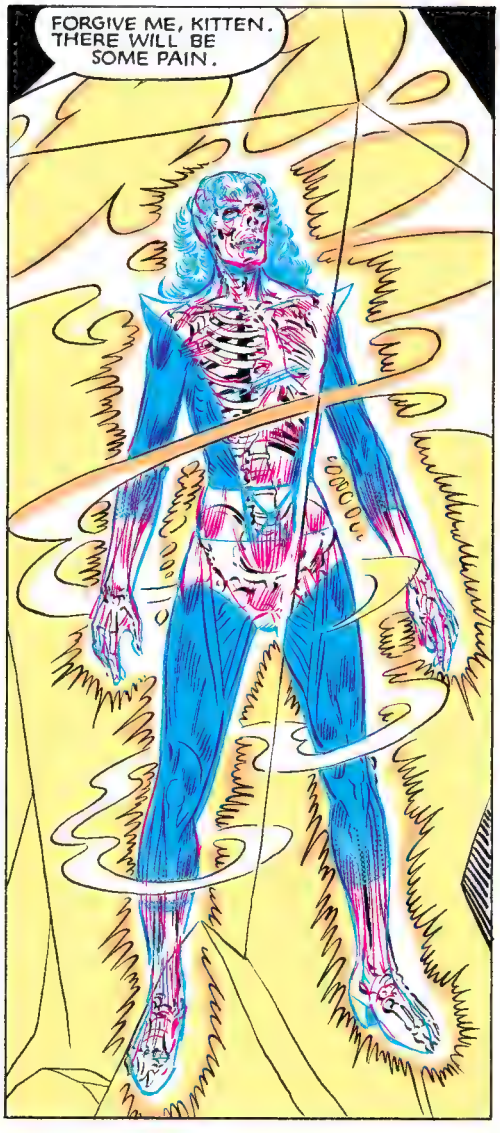
KURT, AWAY FROM HIM!
STORM--!
BUT YOUNG AND VITAL-- AT THE PEAK OF HER ELEMENTAL POWERS!
BAM
YOU HAVE ME AT A DISADVANTAGE, X-MEN.


A SITUATION THAT WILL SOON BE REMEDIED!

QUICKLY, HALTINGLY, NIGHTCRAWLER TELLS ALL THAT HE HAS SEEN AND HEARD...
... I DEFEATED MY EVIL DOPPELGÄNGER, TOOK HIS CLOTHES, PLAYED HIS PART.
BUT STORM, WHAT OF KITTY?! IF SHE IS REMOVED FROM HER CRYSTAL PRISON... WITHOUT HER SKELETON...
BELASCO--!
BELASCO!!
BY MY HEART AND SOUL, YOU SHALL PAY FOR THIS-- IF IT TAKES ME 'TIL THE END OF TIME!
SHE SUMMONS A HURRICANE TO SWEEP HER AFTER THE DEMON LORD...
...BUT SUDDENLY, SURPRISINGLY...
...THE WIND TURNS ON HER, STOPS HER IN MID-FLIGHT.
NO, WIND-RIDER. THAT YOU MUST NOT DO.
WHY NOT?! WHO ARE YOU, STRANGER...
... TO COMMAND THE X-MEN?!
SEE FOR YOURSELF.
I, TOO, FACED THIS CHOICE. I FOLLOWED BELASCO, MY FRIENDS FOLLOWED ME. THEY DIED. I... WAS DAMNED. I WILL NOT ALLOW THAT TRAGEDY TO HAPPEN AGAIN.
PHANTASTICH! BELASCO SPOKE OF THIS. WE ARE IN A MAGICKAL LIMBO...
...WHERE NONE OF THE RULES OF SPACE AND TIME APPLY. WE CAN BE BOTH OLD AND YOUNG, ALIVE AND DEAD, GOOD AND... EVIL.
SPARE ME YOUR PHILOSOPHY, KURT. IF YOU WISH TO BE OF USE...
... FIND ME A WAY TO SAVE KITTY.

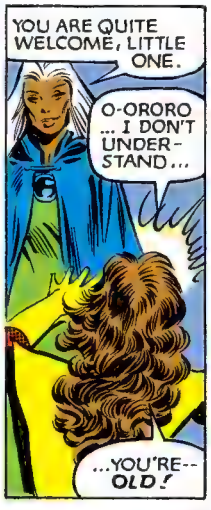
I THINK I CAN BE OF ASSISTANCE, STORM.
AS I GREW OLDER AND MY ABILITY TO CONTROL THE ELEMENTS WANED, I TURNED TO THE OTHER HALF OF MY HERITAGE: SORCERY.


BELASCO ALLOWED MY STUDY OF THE BLACK ARTS, ASSUMING THAT THEIR FUNDAMENTAL EVIL WOULD CORRUPT ME AS THEY HAD NIGHTCRAWLER.
HIS ERROR.

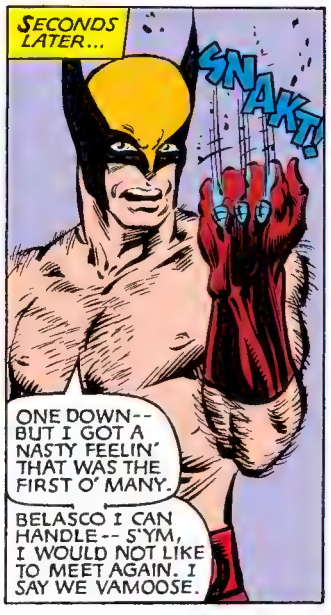

FORGIVE ME, KITTEN. THERE WILL BE SOME PAIN.

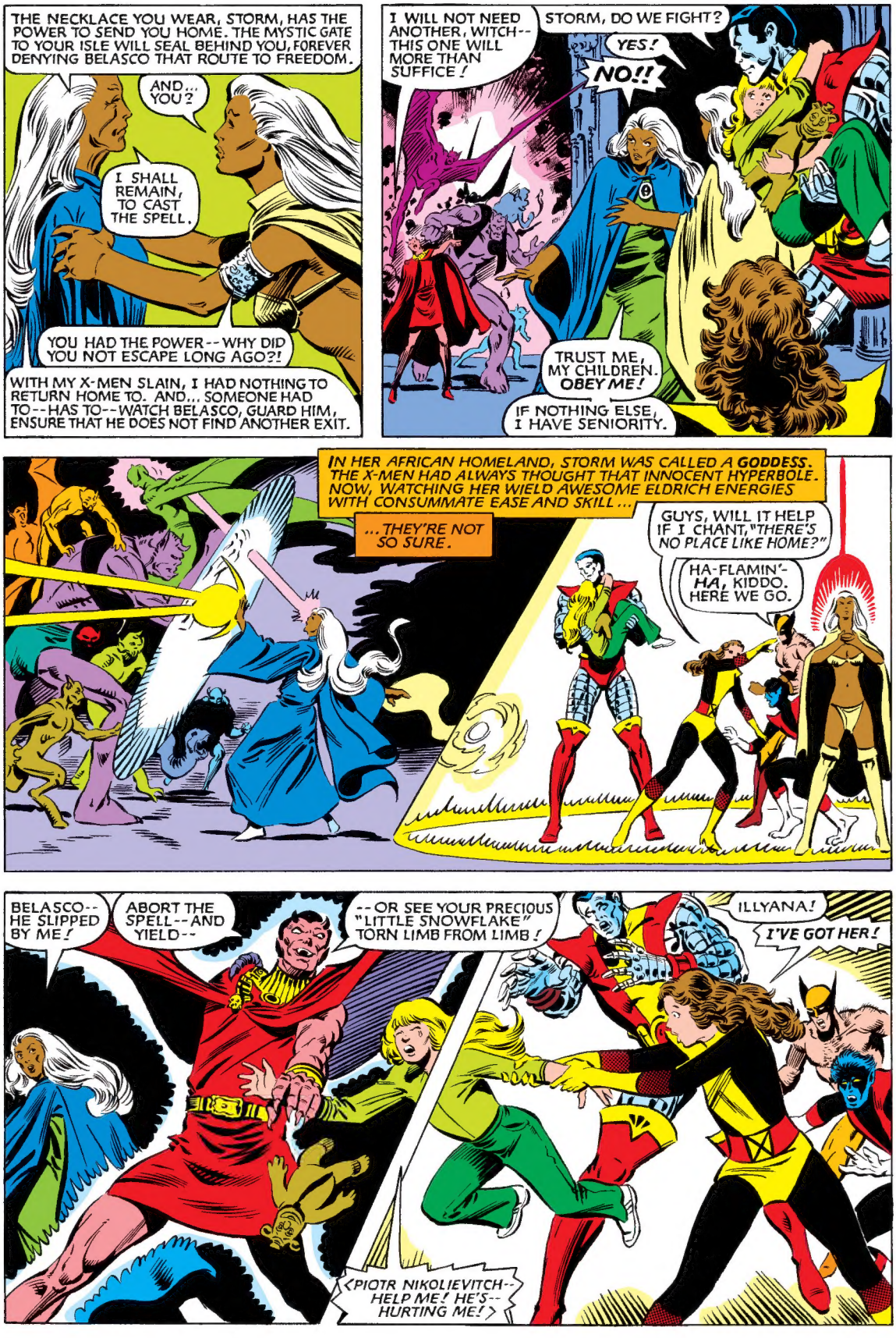
WOW!
I... I'M ME AGAIN! I'M WHOLE!!

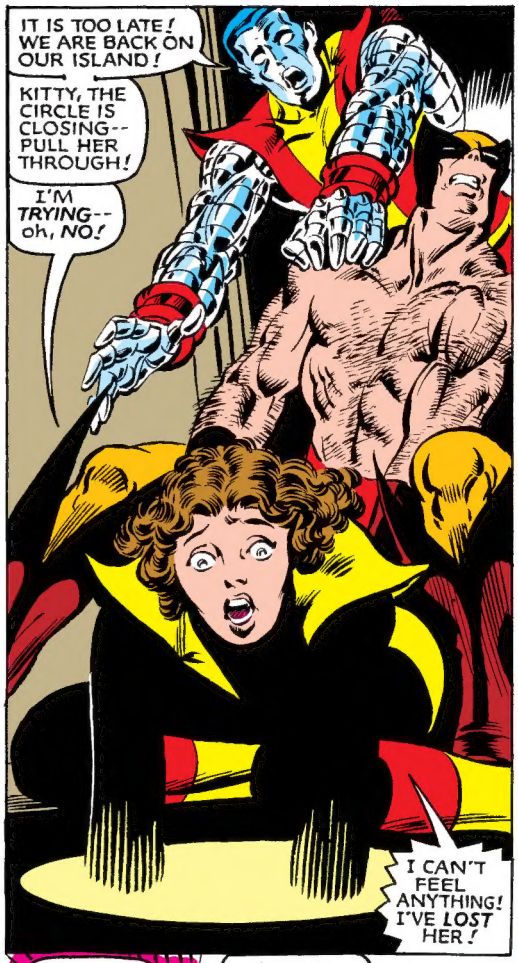
OH--THANK YOU, ORORO!
THANK YOU! THANK YOU!


YOU ARE QUITE WELCOME, LITTLE ONE.
O-ORORO ... I DON'T UNDER-STAND...
...YOU'RE--OLD!

HEADS UP, TROOPS!
SNIKT!
WE GOT COMPANY!

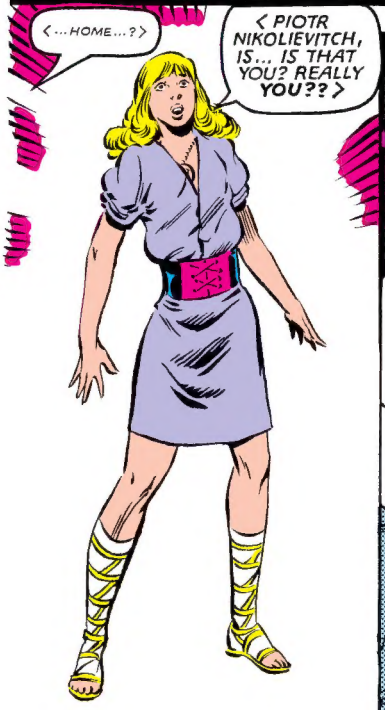

SECONDS LATER...
SNAKT!
ONE DOWN--BUT I GOT A NASTY FEELIN' THAT WAS THE FIRST O' MANY.
BELASCO I CAN HANDLE-- S'YM, I WOULD NOT LIKE TO MEET AGAIN. I SAY WE VAMOOSE.

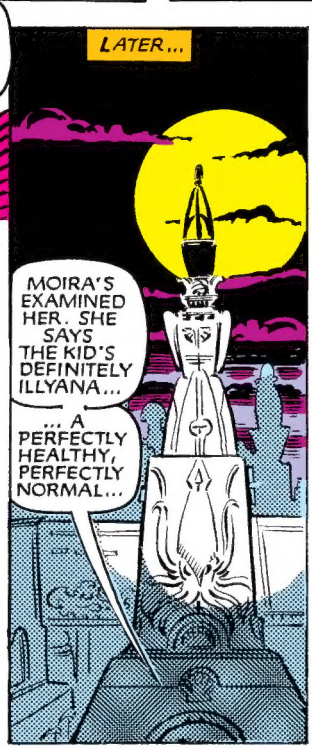

THE NECKLACE YOU WEAR, STORM, HAS THE POWER TO SEND YOU HOME. THE MYSTIC GATE TO YOUR ISLE WILL SEAL BEHIND YOU, FOREVER DENYING BELASCO THAT ROUTE TO FREEDOM.
AND... YOU?
I SHALL REMAIN, TO CAST THE SPELL.
YOU HAD THE POWER--WHY DID YOU NOT ESCAPE LONG AGO?!
WITH MY X-MEN SLAIN, I HAD NOTHING TO RETURN HOME TO. AND... SOMEONE HAD TO--HAS TO--WATCH BELASCO, GUARD HIM, ENSURE THAT HE DOES NOT FIND ANOTHER EXIT.
I WILL NOT NEED ANOTHER, WITCH--THIS ONE WILL MORE THAN SUFFICE!
STORM, DO WE FIGHT?
YES!
NO!!
TRUST ME, MY CHILDREN. OBEY ME!
IF NOTHING ELSE, I HAVE SENIORITY.
IN HER AFRICAN HOMELAND, STORM WAS CALLED A GODDESS. THE X-MEN HAD ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT INNOCENT HYPERBOLE. NOW, WATCHING HER WIELD AWESOME ELDRICH ENERGIES WITH CONSUMMATE EASE AND SKILL...
...THEY'RE NOT SO SURE.
GUYS, WILL IT HELP IF I CHANT, "THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME?"
HA-FLAMIN'-HA, KIDDO. HERE WE GO.
BELASCO--HE SLIPPED BY ME!
ABORT THE SPELL--AND YIELD--
--OR SEE YOUR PRECIOUS "LITTLE SNOWFLAKE" TORN LIMB FROM LIMB!
ILLYANA!
I'VE GOT HER!
<PIOTR NIKOLIEVITCH--HELP ME! HE'S--HURTING ME!>

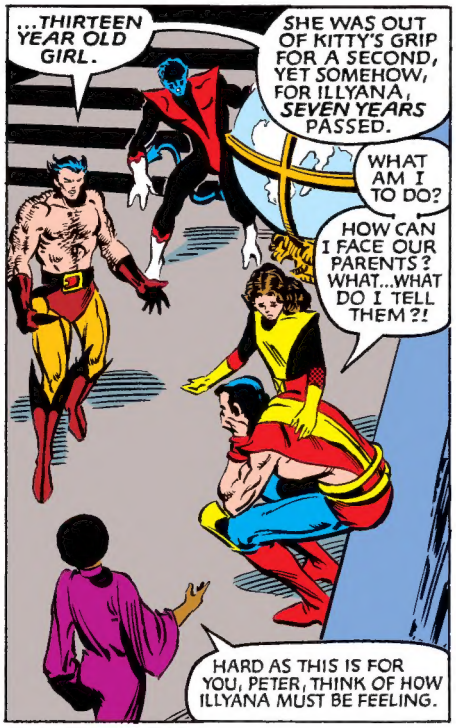

IT IS TOO LATE! WE ARE BACK ON OUR ISLAND!
KITTY, THE CIRCLE IS CLOSING--PULL HER THROUGH!
I'M TRYING--oh, NO!
I CAN'T FEEL ANYTHING! I'VE LOST HER!

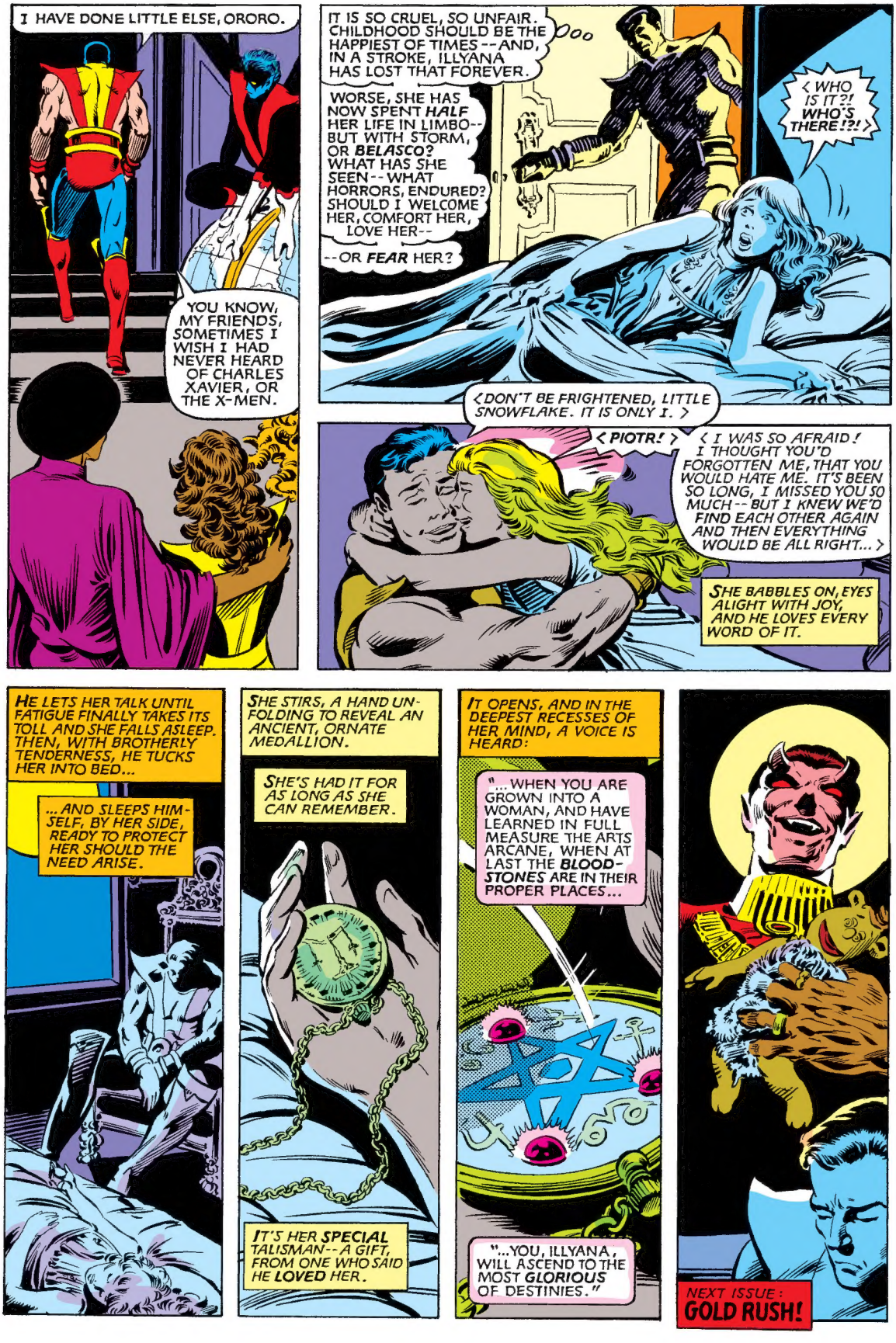
WAIT! THERE SHE IS!
BUT BELASCO'S PULLING JUST AS HARD! HELP ME--ALL OF YOU--I'M NOT STRONG ENOUGH!
PULL!

WE DID IT!!
<ILLYANA NATALYANOVNA--BELOVED SISTER--WELCOME...>


<...HOME...?>
< PIOTR NIKOLIEVITCH, IS... IS THAT YOU? REALLY YOU??>


LATER...
MOIRA'S EXAMINED HER. SHE SAYS THE KID'S DEFINITELY ILLYANA...
... A PERFECTLY HEALTHY, PERFECTLY NORMAL...


...THIRTEEN YEAR OLD GIRL.
SHE WAS OUT OF KITTY'S GRIP FOR A SECOND, YET SOMEHOW, FOR ILLYANA, SEVEN YEARS PASSED.
WHAT AM I TO DO?
HOW CAN I FACE OUR PARENTS? WHAT...WHAT DO I TELL THEM?!
HARD AS THIS IS FOR YOU, PETER, THINK OF HOW ILLYANA MUST BE FEELING.


I HAVE DONE LITTLE ELSE, ORORO.
YOU KNOW, MY FRIENDS, SOMETIMES I WISH I HAD NEVER HEARD OF CHARLES XAVIER, OR THE X-MEN.
IT IS SO CRUEL, SO UNFAIR. CHILDHOOD SHOULD BE THE HAPPIEST OF TIMES--AND, IN A STROKE, ILLYANA HAS LOST THAT FOREVER.
WORSE, SHE HAS NOW SPENT HALF HER LIFE IN LIMBO--BUT WITH STORM, OR BELASCO? WHAT HAS SHE SEEN--WHAT HORRORS, ENDURED? SHOULD I WELCOME HER, COMFORT HER, LOVE HER--
--OR FEAR HER?
< WHO IS IT?! WHO'S THERE!?! >
< DON'T BE FRIGHTENED, LITTLE SNOWFLAKE. IT IS ONLY I. >
< PIOTR! >
< I WAS SO AFRAID! I THOUGHT YOU'D FORGOTTEN ME, THAT YOU WOULD HATE ME. IT'S BEEN SO LONG, I MISSED YOU SO MUCH--BUT I KNEW WE'D FIND EACH OTHER AGAIN AND THEN EVERYTHING WOULD BE ALL RIGHT... >
SHE BABBLES ON, EYES ALIGHT WITH JOY, AND HE LOVES EVERY WORD OF IT.
HE LETS HER TALK UNTIL FATIGUE FINALLY TAKES ITS TOLL AND SHE FALLS ASLEEP. THEN, WITH BROTHERLY TENDERNESS, HE TUCKS HER INTO BED...
... AND SLEEPS HIMSELF, BY HER SIDE, READY TO PROTECT HER SHOULD THE NEED ARISE.
SHE STIRS, A HAND UNFOLDING TO REVEAL AN ANCIENT, ORNATE MEDALLION.
SHE'S HAD IT FOR AS LONG AS SHE CAN REMEMBER.
IT'S HER SPECIAL TALISMAN--A GIFT, FROM ONE WHO SAID HE LOVED HER.
IT OPENS, AND IN THE DEEPEST RECESSES OF HER MIND, A VOICE IS HEARD:
"... WHEN YOU ARE GROWN INTO A WOMAN, AND HAVE LEARNED IN FULL MEASURE THE ARTS ARCANE, WHEN AT LAST THE BLOOD-STONES ARE IN THEIR PROPER PLACES...
"...YOU, ILLYANA, WILL ASCEND TO THE MOST GLORIOUS OF DESTINIES."
NEXT ISSUE: GOLD RUSH!

MINUTEMEN

Sy13nt
Bob